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“The Name of Yahveh is Called Upon You.” Deuteronomy 28:10 and the Apotropaic Qualities of Tefillin in the Early Rabbinic Literature

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Abstract

Although the apotropaic qualities of tefillin have been generally recognised, there is one additional aspect that needs some further attention. The main purpose of this paper is therefore to present the connection between tefillin and Deuteronomy 28:10 that is drawn in the early Rabbinic literature. The said verse reads: “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” and in itself bears the meaning of distinction, provision and protection. Yet, despite this verse’s interpretative potential, it is referred to just eleven times in the scope of both Talmuds and Midrash R. Seven of these references are clustered in the Babylonian Talmud: one (Berakhot 56a) interprets the passage as a metaphor of fame, whereas the remaining six (Berakhot 6a, 57a; Megillah 16b; Sotah 17a; Menahot 35b; Hullin 89a) explicitly state that the words “the name of Yahveh is called upon you” refer to head-tefillin. Meanwhile, the other four mentions (Exodus R. 15:6, 17; Deuteronomy R. 1:25; JT Berakhot 5:1 37b-38a) portray Israel as an earthly representative of Yahveh respected and feared by the heathens, despite the military supremacy of the latter. This indirect connection between tefillin and the idea of godly

provision is supported by BT Menahot 36b and Mekhilta de-rabbi Ishmael to Exodus 12:23, 14:29, which explain the power of tefillin as stemming from the sacred names contained therein. This explanation fits the broader context of the apotropaic power of divine appellations.

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The amulet

The amuletic function of tefillin has already been recognised by numerous scholars,¹ who use several arguments. First, an amulet is usually defined as a protective device believed to ward off evil and mishap in their various guises. It comes in a number of shapes and sizes, is usually worn as a circlet, necklace or bracelet, and often contains some text of special religious significance. If we assume a comparative stance and rely on the external description supplied by various modern treatises, the tefillin meet the definitional criteria of an amulet.² Besides, this artefact became known to the world under the Greek name “phylacteries.” This in turn conveys a meaning of a protective object,³ and as such has been utilised by several ancient sources, like Matthew 23:5, Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* 46:5, and Jerome’s homily on Matthew 26:168.⁴ The choice of this particular Greek equivalent bears witness to the ancient functional interpretation of the said device.⁵

¹ Among the earliest proponents are L. Blau, E. Schuerer and T. Reik. For a review of the initial scholarship see: Y.B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*, “Brown Judaic Studies” 2008, pp. 3–9.

² *Amulet* [in:] *Jewish Encyclopedia*, I. Singer, Funk and Wagnalls (eds.), New York 1901–1906 [JE], [online] <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1445-amulet>, [accessed on: 25 October 2014]. J.L. Crow, *Miracle or Magic? The Problematic Status of Christian Amulets* [in:] *Discussion to Experience: Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam*, J. Braak D. Malone (eds.), Amsterdam 2009, p. 99. T.H. Gaster, *Amulets and Talismans* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, 2nd edition, L. Jones (ed.), Detroit 2005, pp. 297–298.

³ The other Greek words for “amulet” are *peripta* or *periammata*, which literally signifies “things tied around,” analogously to the Hebrew *qame‘a* derived from the root *קמ* meaning “to bind.” This is all the more relevant as it is often stated that the essence of the *mitzvat tefillin* is the process of fastening rather than wearing it. Y.B. Cohn, *op.cit.*, pp. 133–134. J.L. Crow, *op.cit.*, p. 100. H. Lookstein, *Tefillin and God’s Kingship*, “Tradition” 1961, vol. 4, no. 1 (Fall), p. 69.

⁴ Sources provided by: L.I. Rabinowitz, *Tefillin* [in:] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 19, 2nd edition, F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum (eds.), Detroit 2007, p. 122. D.C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*, Pennsylvania 2006, p. 33. J. Trachtenberg, *op.cit.*, p. 139. For a discussion on Matthew 23:5 see: J.H. Tigay, *On the Term Phylacteries (Matt 23:5)*, “The Harvard Theological Review” 1979, vol. 72, no. 1/2 (Jan.–Apr.), especially pp. 45–49.

⁵ Y.B. Cohn convincingly argues that the tefillin should be perceived as an invented tradition aimed at counteracting the popularity of the Greek amulets with an “original” Jewish one. *Idem*, *op.cit.*, especially pp. 88–99, 148. See also: E.S. Alexander, *Women’s Exemption from Shema and Tefillin and How These Rituals Came to be Viewed as Torah Study* [in:] “Journal for the Study of Judaism” 2011, no. 42, p. 574. S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, New York 1962, p. 108.

The second group of arguments comes from the semantic field of the Hebrew word *totafot*, providing the scriptural basis for the obligation to don the tefillin.⁶ The former word in both the biblical and Rabbinic contexts denotes a headband,⁷ and,

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according to some more anthropologically inclined scholars, every ornament worn on the body initially served the purpose of an amulet.⁸ Moreover, although the etymology of *totafot* is subject to numerous speculations, close parallels in other Semitic languages are found. The Ugaritic *tpty* denotes an amuletic head-ornament belonging to Ba'al,⁹ the Akkadian *taptappu* means a double-headed apotropaic figurine,¹⁰ whereas the Egyptian *ddft* is identified with uraeus, a serpentine diadem worn by the Egyptian rulers and signifying divine protection¹¹ – each of these cases presents some explicit amuletic association.

Thirdly and most importantly, the early rabbinic literature furnishes more or less explicit examples of the apotropaic qualities of tefillin. For instance, Bamidbar R. 12:3 presents tefillin as capable of defeating “a thousand demons” emerging on “the left side,” rabbis Yohanan and Nahman used their sets to repel the fiends inhabiting privies in BT Berakhot 23a-b,¹² whereas Elisha the Winged, who was scrupulous in performing this

⁶ The word *tefillin* itself does not appear in the Hebrew Bible [HB] at all. This translated directly into the eagerness of later commentators to fill the biblical gaps, and as a result there is a striking contrast between what is contained in the HB and the data present in the later Rabbinic literature.

⁷ Often in a metaphorical sense. See for instance: Proverbs 4:9; 6:20–22 metaphorising various qualities as pieces of jewellery, or M Sabbath 6:1,5 listing types of women’s adornment. P.D. Miller, *Apotropaic Imagery in Proverbs 6:20-22*, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies” 1970, vol. 29, no. 2 (Apr.), p. 130. Y.B. Cohn, *op.cit.*, p. 117. *Phylacteries* in: JE, [online], <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12125-phylacteries>, [accessed on: 25 September 2014]. M. Weinfeld, *Perushah shel Qriy’at Shema’ ha-Miqra’it*, [online], <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=13044> [accessed on: 25 September 2014].

⁸ J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, New York, 1939, p. 132.

⁹ Y.B. Cohn, *op.cit.*, p. 33, footnote number 1. M. Weinfeld, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ E.A. Speiser, *Twipt*, “The Jewish Quarterly Review” 1957, New Series, vol. 48, no. 2, (Oct.), pp. 210–215.

¹¹ H. Grimme, after: M. Weinfeld, *op.cit.* This line of interpretation should be perceived in the broader context of the hypothetical Egyptian origins of various Jewish (and *per extenso* – Christian) customs. Arguments for the priority of this cultural circle are presented in: R.A. Gabriel, *Gods of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity*, Greenwood 2002, especially pp. 170–172.

¹² This finds justification in the belief of the world being pandemonic in nature. H. Aviezer, *Ha-Mezuzah – beyn Mitzvah le-Qame’a*, “Ma’aliyot” 1997, no. 19, p. 224. See for instance BT Berakhot 6a: “It was taught that Abba Benyamin used to say: if the eye had the authority to see [them], no creature would endure the demons. Abaye says: they are more numerous and surround us like the ridge around the field. Rabbi Huna says: everyone has a thousand on their left and myriad on their right.” See also Deuteronomy R. 4:4: “Rabbi Abba bar Zeira said: there is no such place in the world, {even of the smallest measures} which has not been inhabited by several thousand demons. Each one has a mask put on his face so he would not look at a man and thus harm him. However, when man’s sin demand it, he removes his mask from his face, stares at him and thus harms him.” All the source texts are presented in the author’s own translation unless stated otherwise. The square brackets indicate the words introduced in translation, the curly brackets represent the words translated freely, and the soft

mitzvah, was miraculously saved from the Roman persecution in BT Shabbat 49a. Also, tefillin are believed to possess life-lengthening qualities, as suggested in BT Menahot 36b, 44a-b and in BT Shabbat 13a-b.¹³ In addition, they are often listed in one breath among various items which are considered amuletic in nature, as is the case in M Kelim 23:1, M Eruvin 10:1 or BT Eruvin 96b-97a.¹⁴

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The name

In sum, if we rely on the arguments presented above, there can be no doubts in regard to the protective function of the said artefact. On closer inspection, however, the Rabbinic sources betray one more aspect, namely the connection that is drawn between tefillin and Deuteronomy 28:10. The verse reads “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you,” in itself conveying the meaning of provision and protection.¹⁵ Yet, despite its broad interpretative potential,¹⁶ it appears only eleven times in the scope of both Talmuds and Midrash R. These instances can be further

brackets show additional remarks. The priority of the translations was to maintain the inherent ambiguity of the text.

¹³ For the connection between “prolonging the days” and protection in the world where relatively few deaths are caused by old age see: E.-M. Jansson, *The Message of a Mitzvah: The Mezuzah in Rabbinic Literature*, Lund 1999, pp. 10, 44, 157, 160.

¹⁴ For more on the relationship between tefillin and *qme'ot*: A. Stollman, *Mahadurah u-Perush 'al Derekh ha-Mehqar le-Pereq "Ha-Motze' Tefillin" mitokh ha-Talmud ha-Bavli ('Eruvin, Pereq 'Eshiri)*, [PhD thesis], Ramat Gan 2006, pp. 51–54.

¹⁵ The passage utilises the phrase *niqra' shem 'al*, literally “to have one’s name called upon somebody or something.” The comparison with other occurrences in the HB proves that the expression is idiomatic and conveys the idea of property, dominion and guardianship over objects belonging to various classes, like single persons (Jeremiah 15:16, Isaiah 4:1), groups (Amos 9:12), buildings (1 Kings 8:43 = 2 Chronicles 6:33, Jeremiah 7:10-30, 32:34, 34:15), objects (2 Samuel 6:2 = 1 Chronicles 13:6) and cities (Jeremiah 25:29, Daniel 9:18; 2 Samuel 12:28) with its inhabitants (Daniel 9:19). For more source references see: F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford Clarendon Press 1907, [BDB], (CD-ROM), 8690. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, B.K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago 2003, [TWOT], (CD-ROM), 2063. E.S. Kalland, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Zondervan 2002–2004 (CD-ROM). L. Kohler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden 2002, [HALOT], (CD-ROM), 7615. Moreover, although the semantic range of the Hebrew word *shem* as well as its equivalents in other Semitic languages is broad and the exact meaning is highly context-dependent, in all of the above instances it functions first and foremost in its non-primary meaning as the token of exclusive ownership. BDB 10046. TWOT 2405. HALOT 8694. For a discussion of the so-called name theology see: M.S. Heiser, *The Name Theology in Israelite Religion*, [online], <http://michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/2011/11/the-name-theology-in-israelite-religion/>, [accessed on: 25 September 2014], p. 5. W.M. Schniedewind, *The Evolution of Name Theology*, [in:] *The Chronicler as Theologian*, M.P. Graham (ed.), London 2003, pp. 231–233.

¹⁶ It is only the later Kabbalistic sources that bear witness to the developed elaboration of Deuteronomy 28:10. In this regard see: A. Afterman, *Qesher Tfilin Her'ah le-'Aniv Tmunat H' leneged 'Aynav": Gilgulah shel Tmunah Midrashit be-Ro'shit ha-Qabalah*, “Te'udah,” *Mitos*, [No] 26, [edition:] *Ritu'al u-Mistiqaq. Mehaqrim le-Khavod Profressor] 'Itamar Gruenwald*, G. Bohak, R. Margolin, I. Rosen-Zvi (eds.), Tel-Aviv 2013, pp. 441–480.

partitioned into two larger groups. The first one contains seven references which are clustered in the Babylonian Talmud [BT]. One of them appears in Berakhot 56a in the longer account of Bar Hedyā – a “wizard” who explains a series of dreams in which Rabbi Abayē and Raba encounter particular biblical passages. In the middle of the *sugya*, the rabbis report the following to Bar Hedyā:

[They said to him]: we were supposed to read [the verse]: “and all the nations of the land...” (Deuteronomy 28:10). To Abayē he said: the fame¹⁷ will come to you as the head of academy and everyone in the world will fall in front of you.

Bar Hedyā’s explanation is therefore based on the broad semantic range of the word “name,” and draws a connection between the nations in awe of Israel and students respecting Abayē. However, this exposition is unique, because the lion’s share

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of the references to Deuteronomy 28:10 from the BT explicitly and almost univocally state that the words “the name of Yahveh is called upon you” refer to head-tefillin:

It is written: “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” (Deuteronomy 28:10). It has been taught, Rabbi Eliezer the Great says that this refers to head-tefillin.¹⁸

This passage concludes six other places that speak about various qualities of tefillin. Let us now compare what exactly is being said in each of the instances. First and foremost, tefillin are presented as the strength given by Yahveh in Berakhot 6a. The fragment reads:

Rabbi Abin, the son of Rabbi Ada said [in the name of] Rabbi Yitzhaq: how do you know that the Holy, blessed be he, puts on tefillin? It has been said: “Yahveh has sworn on his right hand and on the arm of his strength” (Isaiah 62:8). [The words] “on his right hand” refer to the Torah as has been said: “from his right – a {fiery decree} for them” (Deuteronomy 33:2), {whereas} “on the arm of his strength” refers to tefillin as has been said: “Yahveh will give strength to his people” (Psalm 29:11). And how do we know that tefillin are strength to Israel? It is written: “and all the nations...”

¹⁷ Aram. *shema*, literally: “the name.”

¹⁸ This interpretation is also transmitted in the relatively late Targum Pseudo-Yonatan ad loc. which reads: “And all the nations of the earth will see that the Name is written by (His own) appointment on the tephillin that are upon thee, and will be afraid of thee.” Tr. J.W. Etheridge.

This passage is unique in presenting the deity as engaged in performing the commandments. What is more, the divine set of tefillin is said to contain the additional biblical verse saying: “and who is like your people, Israel – the {only}¹⁹ nation on earth that God would ransom? The nation to {bring} you fame”²⁰ (1 Chronicles 17:21a). No less significant is the immediate context of this passage. The folio 6a opens up with the famous statement of Abba Benyamin concerning the omnipresence of demons constantly threatening humans,²¹ and terminates with the idea of prayer and Torah study that draw down the *shekhinah*.

The other occurrence is present in Megillah 16b, which revolves around the biblical story of Esther and Jewish persecutions under the Persian rule. Similarly, Israel is portrayed as representing Yahveh among the nations. Moreover, despite the difficulties,

“the Jews {attained} light, gladness, rejoicing, and honour”²² (Esther 8:16). Rabbi Yehudah says: “light” is the Torah as it says: “the candle is [like a] mitzvah and the Torah is [like] the light” (Proverbs 6:23). “Gladness” is a festival day as it says: “you shall be glad on your fest”

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(Deuteronomy 16:14). “Rejoicing” is the circumcision as it says: “I rejoice {because of} your word” (Psalm 119:162). “Honour” is tefillin as it says: “and all the nations...”²³

Finally, tefillin work as an adornment and distinction given to Israel for the merits of the forefathers. This idea is transmitted in a fragment that appears in Sotah 17a and Hullin 89a:

Raba explained [the biblical passage]: Abraham said [to the king of Sodom]: “[I will take] {neither} a thread {nor} a sandal-strap {from you}” (Genesis 14:23) and as a reward for him saying so his sons earned two *mitzvot*:

¹⁹ Heb. *'ehad*. For the semantic potential of the word see: D.I. Block, *How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5*, “The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society” 2004, no. 47/2, pp. 196, 199–200. C.H. Gordon, *His Name Is 'One'*, “Journal of Near Eastern Studies,” 1970, vol. 29, no. 3, p. 198. B.E. Willoughby, *A Heartfelt Love: An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4–19*, “Restoration Quarterly” 1977, no. 20, p. 78.

²⁰ Heb. *shem*.

²¹ See footnote number 12 of the present paper.

²² Heb. *'orah, simhah, shashon, yeqar*.

²³ Heb. *milah* means both “circumcision” and “word” – thus the wordplay utilised in the exposition. See also Rashi ad. loc.

the blue {fringes} [of the garment] and the strap of tefillin. That [it refers] to the strap of tefillin is {granted by the verse}: “and all the nations...”

In a somewhat similar tone is the mention in Berakhot 57a, which follows the subject of dream interpretation and compares tefillin to the quality of greatness:

The one who puts on tefillin in dreams will attain greatness²⁴ as has been said: “and all the nations...”

The last passage appears in the longer fragment in Menahot 32a-37b, dealing with the technical details of *mitzvat tefillin*. The account present in folio 35b emphasises the idea of the visibility of tefillin:

When Rabbi Ashi was sitting in front of Mar Zutra the strap of his tefillin turned around. [Mar Zutra] {asked} him: did not the Master claim that [tefillin’s] ornamentation should be on the outside [and visible]? [Ashi] {answered}: I did not notice it. [It was said]: “and all the nations (...) will see...”

Apparently, the range of associations is broad, and various aspects are referred to in the passages listed above. Yet the recurrent subject in the Babylonian materials is the representativeness of Yahveh among the nations by means of some visible token of identity.

The army

The Palestinian sources in turn take a slightly different exegetical course. This group of instances contains four remaining mentions of the verse in question, and also portray Israel as an earthly representative of Yahveh feared by the heathens. However, unlike the accounts furnished by the BT, they are quicker to use militaristic metaphors and, surprisingly enough, do not draw direct connections between tefillin and Deuteronomy 28:10. The first such occurrence comes from Exodus R. 15:6, which opens up with the exposition of the verse “they were terrible as {an army with banners}”

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(Canticles 6:10) and lists the equivalences between Israel and the heavenly army of angels:

²⁴ Heb. *gedulah*.

The banners refer to nothing else than the hosts, as has been said: “the banner of the camp of Yehudah (...) and his host” (Numbers 2:3-4). Thus the angels are the banners of heavens whereas Israel is the banners of earth. The angels are the hosts of heavens as it was said: “[I saw Yahveh sitting on his throne and] the whole host of heavens standing on his right and his left” (2 Chronicles 18:18). Israel is the hosts of earth as it was said: “all the hosts of Yahveh have left the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:41). The Holy, blessed be he, is the lord of the both of them. And just as everyone is afraid of the Holy, blessed be he, and his angels, so are the {idolaters} afraid of Israel, as it was said: “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” (Deuteronomy 28:10). For this reason it is said “they were terrible as {an army with banners}”, because the Holy, blessed be he, likened Israel to angels.

The above passage obviously relies on the biblical idea of Yahveh as the divine commander of both the heavenly and earthly legions. As such, it has a strong background not only in the HB but also in the literature of the ancient Near East in general, which commonly draws upon military metaphors in describing deities and other supernatural beings.²⁵ Accordingly, to belong to the army of Yahveh and to bear his mark is to be respected by the followers of other deities.

The other example appears in a rather lengthy fragment in Exodus R. 15:17, which deals with the oppression of Israel suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire. The midrash makes parallels to the biblical conflicts with Egypt and Edom, and concludes by affirming the divine vigilance over the Hebrews which is to be expected in the current times. It concludes with an ambivalent *meshal* that relies on the motif of the Jewish people as the divine image:

[It may be compared] to a pleasant tree that was planted in a bath house. When an imperial officer²⁶ with his servants came to have a bath, they trod on that tree. So did all the villagers and everyone else desired to step on it. After a few days had passed the [officer] sent his bust to that country so they would make images out of it. Yet there was no other wood apart from that of a tree found in the bath house. The craftsmen said: if you wish to have the images [of you], bring us the tree that is in the bath house, because there is none better than that. They brought it, prepared it and given it to the hands of the carver, who fashioned the images out of it and placed it inside the palace. The ruler came and kneeled in front of it and so did the general, the prefect, the officers, the legionists, the people – everyone [kneeled in front of it]. Then the craftsmen told them: yesterday you were trampling upon that tree in the bath house and today you prostrate in front of it?! They answered: we are not kneeling in front of it for the sake [of the tree] but for the sake of the kingly bust carved therein. So {asked} the people of Gog: up until now we have been doing to Israel what is not allowed as has been said: “to the one despised, to the one abhorred by the nations” (Isaiah 49:7) – and now we are prostrating before [the same]

²⁵ In this respect see P.D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, Atlanta 2006, especially Part Two (pp. 74–127). Worth mentioning here is the metaphysically militaristic hermeneutics of the HB as presented by O. Goldberg, *Rzeczywistość Hebrajczyków*, Kraków 2012, especially pp. 18–36.

²⁶ Hebr. פרוסביטוס. M. Jastrow suggests an emendation to: פרופוסטוס, being the transcription of Lat. *praepositus*. פרוסביטוס in idem, *A Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature*, London 1903, p. 1221.

Israel?! The Holy blessed be he {answered}: yes, because of my name which is inscribed upon them, as has been said: “because of Yahveh who is trustworthy” (Isaiah 49:7). So says Moses:

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“and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” (Deuteronomy 28:10).

The next instance appears in Deuteronomy R. 1:25. The fragment presents various interpretations of Deuteronomy 3:2, which foretells the defeat of King Og: “Yahveh told me: do not be afraid of him, because I have given him and all his people and his land into your hand. I will do to him as I have done to Sihon, the Amorite king who dwells in Heshbon.” At the end of the unit the text reads:

It is not written “I will give (...) into your hand” but “I have given”. [This means] that I have already decreed his fate in the days of Jacob. How come? When Jacob came to Pharaoh to bless him, as has been said “Jacob has blessed the Pharaoh” (Genesis 47:7), Og was sitting there [with them]. Pharaoh said to Og: did you not say that Abraham was a barren mule and would not beget children? Lo and behold: his grandson and seventy {people} [came] from his hip. Immediately Og started to cast an evil eye on them. The Holy, blessed be he, said to him: o, you wicked one – {how dare you} cast evil eye on my sons?! The eye of that man²⁷ will melt and that man will surely fall into their hands. Thus “I have given him (...) into your hand” (Deuteronomy 3:2). The Holy, blessed be he, said to Israel: just as in this world have been the people that have heard your {name}²⁸ and have been afraid of you, so will be in the future to come as have been said: “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” (Deuteronomy 28:10).

The last instance comes from the Jerusalem Talmud [JT] and constitutes the sole reference to that specific biblical verse in the whole corpus. A longer *sugya*’ in Berakhot 5:1 37b-38a portrays several examples of the Jews disrespecting their occupants, yet still being able to get away with the affront, because each time the foreign ruler is presented as acknowledging the Jewish god. Not surprisingly, the final part of the unit proves that the protection granted by the divine providence is extended on the demonic realm as well:

²⁷ Euphemism for Og.

²⁸ The original has שמעכם, which is probably a corruption of שמכם triggered by the proximity of the preceding שומעים.

Rabbi Abun went in front of the king. When he was leaving, he turned his back [thus disrespecting the ruler]. [The guards immediately] wanted to kill him, but saw two sparks of fire going out of his back²⁹ and thus let him alone so as to fulfil what has been said: “and all the nations of the land will see that the name of Yahveh is called upon you and will be afraid of you” (Deuteronomy 28:10). Rabbi Shime‘on bar Yohay said: [the verse] “and all the nations of the land...” [means] {everyone}: even the spirits as well as the demons. Rabbi Yanay and Rabbi Yonatan were travelling on the streets, when they saw one, who {greeted} them and said “may your peace increase”. They said: even the look of the [rabbinic] fellows does not bring on us anything evil.³⁰

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All of these passages speak about the problematic situation of the Jews among the nations and seem to search for some means of empowerment: by providing historical parallels from the Bible, by comparing Israel to angels or simply by acknowledging the divine provision over the nation. Yet, apart from a questionable hint in JT Berakhot 5:1, neither of the passages says a thing about tefillin – as if the Palestinian sources were more cautious in attributing special powers to the artefact.

The weapon

On the other hand, however, the decision to conclude all these fragments with an otherwise unpopular verse is striking. Given the tendency, however scarce it is, to utilise Deuteronomy 28:10 with regard to tefillin in the BT, it may be justified to assume that some connection was intended here as well – especially since the protective function would neatly fit all the narratives. Besides, the interpretative notion manifested in both groups of examples should be perceived against the backdrop of these passages that elaborate on various associations between tefillin and godly appellations. First and foremost, the divine names present in the biblical passages contained inside tefillin are supposed to constitute the functional “core” of the device. This idea is hinted at in BT Menahot 36b, which reads:

Rabbah the son of Rabbi Huna said: a man has to touch his tefillin every hour. {This is inferred} [from the case of] the [priestly] {plate}, which contains [just] one mention [of the divine name], yet the Torah says: “it shall

²⁹ These sparks are supposed to refer to tefillin according to: M. Schwab, *The Talmud of Jerusalem*, London 1886, p. 100, footnote number 7.

³⁰ Heb. *'afilu to'ar hevru' 'eyn 'aleynu le-ra'*. Contra חברות in: M. Jastrow, *op.cit.*, pp. 422–423 and T. Novack's translation: “They said, ‘It even addressed us in friendly terms! It cannot do us any harm!’.” On the phrase *to'ar hevru'* see: S. Kaatz, *Drei Hapaxlegomena*, “Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums” 1939, Jahrg. 83 (N. F. 47) (Januar/Dezember), pp. 278–280.

always be on his forehead” (Exodus 28:38),³¹ so as [to prevent him from] from diverting his mind. [How much more then] the tefillin which contain numerous mentions [of the divine names]?!³²

Second, the connection becomes even more pronounced if this passage is juxtaposed with a similar exposition concerning mezuzah, yet another example of a Jewish apotropaion containing the biblical passages replete with divine names. The account is present in Mekhilta de-rabbi Ishmael, and based on the interpretation of the verse “Yahveh {passed} over the doorways” (Exodus 12:23):

Are not these things [an example of] {the argument from the minor to the major}? The blood of Passover [sacrifice in] Egypt is {the minor}. It {was} [applied] {out of the specific need} and is neither practised day and night nor {continued} in [the later] generations. [Nevertheless], it is written: “it (the blood) will not let the destroying [one]” (Exodus 12:23). Mezuzah is {the major}, as it contains ten special names, acts day and night {as well as} throughout the generations. How much more “will it (the mezuzah) not let the destroying [one]?”

Third, the same corpus contains a similar exposition presented directly in regard to tefillin. Mekhilta to Exodus 14:29 reads:

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How do we know that the rage of the sea has {risen} upon them? It was said: “and the sea [was like] a wall to them” (Exodus 14:29). Do not read “wall,” but “rage.”³³ And what has contributed to Israel, to deliver them “from their right and from their left”? “From their right” – thanks to the Torah which they will receive from the right as it was said: “from his right – a {fiery decree} for them” (Deuteronomy 33:2), {whereas} “from their left is tefillin.” Another interpretation: “from their right” is mezuzah to which Israel is {obliged} whereas “from their left” is tefillin.

This extraordinary power of the divine names manifested in the above passages should be understood in the broader perspective, which is obviously a separate subject. Suffice it to say that the rabbinic literature is replete with references to the exceptional potential of the divine appellations.³⁴ Among these instances there is a group of accounts emphasising the

³¹ The expression is apparently taken to mean “he should constantly think about it.”

³² Cf. the parallel passage in BT Shabbat 12a and BT Yoma 8a.

³³ The exposition utilises the paronomasia and the identical consonantal form of the words *homah* (“wall”) and *hemah* (“rage”).

³⁴ See for instance Betzalel, the divinely inspired builder of the Tent of Meeting in BT Berakhot 55a, the four rabbis who entered Pardes in BT Hagigah 14b and JT Hagigah 2:1, or Rabba, who creates an artificial human in BT Sanhedrin 65b. Rashi (ad loci) interprets all of them as resorting to the knowledge of the secret divine name.

“combat” qualities of the name. The developed demonological exposition of Psalm 91 present in Bamidbar R. 12:3 contains the following remark:

“Under his wings you shall take refuge” – [for] the one who comes to take refuge under the wings of the Holy, blessed be he, he shall be “a shield and a buckler” of truth. What is the meaning of “a shield and a buckler”? Rabbi Shime’on ben Laqish said: the Holy, blessed be he, said: a weapon I {forge} for everyone who deals with the truth of the Torah [and] the truth of the Torah is the weapon for {its masters}. {He also said}: a weapon has given the Holy, blessed be he, to Israel on Sinai, and the {explained name} was written on it.³⁵

Another example of an object inscribed with a divine name and as such possessing special qualities comes from BT Sukkah 53 a-b, which reads:

When David dug the Pits, the {watery chasm} arose and threatened to submerge the world. David asked: “Is there anyone who knows whether it is allowed to inscribe the [divine] name upon a {piece of clay}, and cast it into the {watery chasm} that its waves would subside?” (...) He thereupon inscribed the name upon a {piece of clay}, cast it into the {watery chasm} and it subsided sixteen thousand cubits.³⁶

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In sum, the rabbis’ connection between tefillin and Deuteronomy 28:10 fits the broader context well. It follows the general notion of the application of the divine names and remains in line with other customs being apotropaic in nature. Still, several questions arise. First and foremost, how should this biblical utterance be interpreted against the backdrop of other accounts conveying similar ideas such as the *’ot* of Cain in Genesis 4:15, the *tav* of the

³⁵ Cf. Midrash Tehilim 91. From this perspective the apotropaic notion of tefillin seems to be a specific case of such qualities of the Torah scroll in general, legitimised as an amulet for the king in M Sanhedrin 2:4 and BT Sanhedrin 21b. In addition, there are several accounts presenting Torah study as an activity repelling demons who try to interrupt the studies, as for instance in Mekhilta Bo’ 17; Sifre 45; Berakhot 5a, Genesis R. 22:6; Deuteronomy R. 4:4, Berakhot 5a. C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen 2001, p. 215. I. Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: “Yetzer Hara” and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia 2011, p. 83–84. S. Sabar, *Torah and Magic: The Torah Scroll and Its Appurtenances as Magical Objects in Traditional Jewish Culture*, “European Journal of Jewish Studies” 2009, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 135–138. D.C. Skemer, *op.cit.*, p. 33–34, footnote number 38.

³⁶ Cf. BT Makkot 11a and Bereshit R. 23:7. The sources suggested by M. Isaacson, *The Name of God and the Arava*, http://www.academia.edu/4496787/The_Name_of_God_and_the_Arava [accessed on: 29 January 2014], pp. 1-2. See also a similar account present in BT Hagigah 12a, which reads: “R[esh] L[aqish] said: what is it that is written: “I am ’El Shadday” (Genesis 35:11)? I am he who said to the world “enough!” (Heb. *’ani hu she-’amarti le-’olam: day*). R[esh] L[aqish] [also] said: in the hour that the Holy, blessed be he, created the sea, it started to expand until the Holy, blessed be he, reproached it. [Then] it dried out as it was said: “he reproaches the sea and makes it dry; and all the rivers makes desolate” (Nahum 1:4).” Cf. the variants present in Midrash R. 5:8 and 46:3.

righteous in Jerusalem in Ezekiel 9 or the *sfragis* in Revelation 7:3?³⁷ Second, why is such semantically potent verse referred to so seldom and in such specific contexts exclusively? Finally, why is the tefillin the only apotropaic custom interpreted by means of this passage?

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³⁷ Cf. the “inverted” mark of the imperial seal (Gr. *kharagma*) in Revelation 13:16, 14:9.

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